

Commission on Mission and Evangelism Diocesan Assembly Report 2024
Diocese of New York and New Jersey
Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, DMin - Director

“In addition to the priest’s work in this field, all parish workers must take part in missionary activities: arranging lectures, not only for the parish but for ‘outsiders’ as well; printing weekly or monthly leaflets – religious, educative and apologetical; founding a parish reading room and library of religious books approved by the pastor; and subscribing to religious periodicals...Members of the parish must be secret missionaries.”

Archbishop John Shahovskoy ¹

Introduction

No one can do it alone. We all need to mutually support one another in the Diocese and the parish. If we separate from one another then we will simply fad after a time. However, a healthy parish is one that mutually accepts the vision of the Church and mutually supports one another in growing the parish. As a Diocese we should be sharing material and successful lessons from one another. As a parish we should all be working together in the spirit of love and community. It is incumbent on us, the leaders of the parishes and the Diocese to make this happen in order to grow the Church and strengthen the Orthodox Church in America.

Over the past few years, the Commission has offered many opportunities to share resources, engage in dialogue and to mutually support our work in the Diocese. We continue to lead the way in the Orthodox Church in America in examining ourselves, learning from one another and sharing this with each other. In the coming year, the Commission will continue to call on the Diocese to expand this work and grow in mutual support. We all need to be present at a local, regional and Diocesan level because together we can continue to grow in the spirit that His Eminence has rightly laid out for the Diocese. Our energy needs to match his vision.

Work of the Commission

As Director, I continue to interact with the five missions on a regular basis. While some missions have seen a change in leadership over the year, they continue to operate and to grow. A full-time resident priest in a stable mission has the best chances for the mission to be effective. Any support we can give to make this happen will be critical for the stability of the mission work in the Diocese.

We continue to look for new opportunities to plant missions in regions where there are few, if any, choices for Orthodox worship. I keep His Eminence Archbishop Michael, the Chancellor, Mitered Archpriest Joseph Lickwar and the Deans informed and include them in various communications. Some have attended the quarterly online meetings and the in-person meetings. We also put out calls for items and resources as needed and have good responses. Ask a mission priest what he and his community needs and assist them with good items, not leftovers. Make missions a line item in the budget so we can financially support one another in their work.

The Diocese sponsored the Third Annual Evangelism School at St. Gregory the Theologian Orthodox Church in Wappingers Falls, NY from August 7 to August 9, 2024. The theme and speakers were changed in order to focus on parish revitalization, a critical subject in the Diocese. Among the instructors were His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, Mitred Archpriest Joseph Lickwar, Chancellor of the Diocese and retired rector of Ss. Peter & Paul Cathedral in Jersey City, NJ Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, Director of the Commission on Mission and Evangelism, Archpriest David Garretson, Rector of Ss. Peter & Paul Church in South River, NJ, Archpriest Thomas Soroka, Rector of St. Nicholas Church in McKees Rock, PA. The stories they told and the guidance they gave were invaluable in refocusing a declining parish into a mission-minded parish. A reminder that the school is fully funded by the Diocese and at no cost to the attendees. We should be very grateful for the commitment to this process by His Eminence and the Diocesan Council.

I continue to plan an on-site visits to a missions. I had an opportunity this year to visit St. Olympia in Potsdam, NY and the new mission outside of Ft. Drum, NY. I have other visits planned, time permitting, over the upcoming year. I will not recount the details of each of the missions in the Diocese as you can read about them in their own reports.

1. We continue the monthly online forms that each mission submits for the previous month's activities. These forms are compiled and evaluated in a quarterly report sent to His Eminence, the Chancellor and the Deans. Each quarterly report highlights specific items that may be of interest or concern. His Eminence reviews these with the Chancellor and Deans at periodic meetings.
2. There are quarterly meetings (via Zoom) with the mission clergy in which each share details of their ministry with one another as well as discussing challenges and issues that are of mutual benefit to the life of the missions. These are recorded and a summary is sent to His Eminence. His Eminence, the Chancellor and Deans are invited to attend these meetings and some of whom have participated on an ongoing basis.
3. We had an in-person meeting of mission clergy after the clergy retreat. We will continue to schedule one in the upcoming year. The goal of these meetings is to have an annual gathering and to be able to concentrate on specific topics in-depth and have a detailed discussion.
4. The quarterly newsletter on missions and evangelism entitled *Koinonia* continues to be published and disseminated to the Diocese. The newsletter contain articles on a particular theme as well as reflections and a review of missionary activities of the Diocese. This year's theme has been on converts to the Faith sharing their stories on their own journey. All parishes and clergy in the Diocese receive the electronic newsletter and it is posted on the Diocesan website.
5. We continue to look for various liturgical items and vestments which can be distributed to the missions. If you have any items that are in good condition, please contact Fr. Eric. We are still planning to establish a mission fund for the Diocese to assist with the needs of the current missions, plan future missions and support the work of the CME in activities such as training. If you are interested in contributing or participating in this, please contact Fr. Eric.
6. As mentioned in the introduction, we are discussing new mission possibilities with His Eminence. The pace of establishing these missions depends on the availability of clergy interested in serving and building them. As a challenge, every priest/parish in the Diocese should be looking around

their area as to where the next mission could be established. For example, is there a cluster of Orthodox or parishioners who live in a certain area and travel some distance for services? If so perhaps this is a place to look into and establish monthly services. Is there a lay leader who is passionate about mission and would like to assist in identifying new communities? That person should be encouraged and supported. There is always one more possibility out there for us to explore.

Conclusion

“A parish that strives for such activity, for such true understanding of the purpose and meaning of the earthly Church’s existence will be a true blessing for the world around it. Souls that have grown cold and gone astray in the world can only be drawn to God through a gracious understanding and fulfilment of His work on earth..”

*Archbishop John Shahovskoy*²

Many parishes are experiencing an influx of people, especially young people, that we have not seen for a very long time. We must take advantage of this opening, in fact a revitalization, of parishes and missions by being open to them, ministering to them, and ultimately leading them to God. We are being presented a gift that many of us have not seen in many years. How will we respond? Will our doors be shut to them? Will our hearts be cold towards them? Will we be the gatekeepers that prevent them from finding and becoming part of the fulness of the Faith? Or will we activate ourselves and our parishes to welcome them, to find a place for them in the community, to educate and receive them? This is our missionary imperative that we have before us. It is up to each of us, the priest, the council, the leadership to focus on this gift that we have been handed. We need to make it happen together.

¹ John Shahovskoy, *A Guide to Pastoral Theology: The Orthodox Pastor*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 87.

² IBID, 86.